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Today, the Department of Energy's (DOE) Ohio Field Office released the results of and actions responsive to its investigation of waste containers that leaked during a routine waste shipment on December 15, 1997. The investigation concluded that the leaks occurred when stress fractures (cracks) in two containers were widened by the vibration and wear associated with highway transport. The cause of the event was that Fluor Daniel Fernald (FDF) had an inadequate contracting process with its supplier, which resulted in faulty containers.

The waste containers were white metal boxes that contained earth and fine, chalk-like silica that held trace amounts of uranium (0.02% to 0.57% uranium). It was being transported from the Fernald Environmental Management Project (FEMP) in Ohio to the Department of Energy's Nevada Test Site. The leak was discovered near Kingman, Arizona, approximately 120 miles from the Nevada Test Site. No radiological contamination was detected.

The investigation found that the leaking fluid was not hazardous to the health and safety of the public or damaging to the environment. The investigation report also noted that all emergency notifications to State of Arizona and DOE emergency response officials were made in a timely manner, and that State of Arizona and City of Kingman police and emergency personnel handled the situation in an exemplary manner. The waste shipments from Fernald to the Nevada Test Site will remain suspended until the report's findings have been resolved.

Four contributing causes for the leak were identified:

1. Containers were used for shipping after design flaws were identified in earlier container failures;
2. Lack of understanding of the properties of the waste, specifically that excess free liquid would form during transportation;
3. Lack of formality and rigor in contracting oversight between DOE Fernald and DOE Nevada;

4. And failure to provide the appropriate attention and oversight to these shipments because of the relatively low potential threat to public health and safety.

Noting "lapses in rigor", DOE Ohio Field Office Manager Leah Dever directed an analysis of technical and operations issues related to the waste containers and sorbents; a review of FDF's contracting and quality assurance procedures and of DOE's contractor oversight of waste management operations at Fernald and other Ohio Field Office Project sites -- in addition to an in-depth corrective action plan to be completed in 45 days. Dever initiated the investigation on December 22, 1997.

Acting Assistant Secretary for Environmental Management Jim Owendoff has directed DOE Ohio and other DOE sites to promptly review the investigation report and apply lessons learned, to evaluate waste container specifications and to assess procurement and waste packaging procedures. In addition, he has established a working group to develop specific technical guidance to ensure that this type of event does not happen again.

Owendoff said, "We are troubled by lapses in contractor management and DOE oversight, especially because problems with the containers had been identified on previous occasions. The Environmental Management Program can be successful only with a commitment to doing it right the first time and to a disciplined approach to quality control."

"We are pleased that the investigation determined that the leaks did not create hazards to public health and safety or to the environment. And we appreciate the successful emergency response by the State of Arizona and the Department of Energy. But it is clear there is work to be done to ensure that this does not happen again. We have already begun coordinating with our colleagues in Nevada and FDF to create an in-depth plan of action", said Dever.

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"Safety is critically important to the Environmental Management program. Notwithstanding Fluor Daniel Fernald's high level of performance in most areas, we believe that improvement in safety is necessary prior to awarding a third-year option for the contract", said Al Alm, Assistant Secretary for Environmental Management.

In reaching this decision the Department recognizes the valuable work Fluor Daniel has accomplished during the first five years of the Fernald Contract. These accomplishments include dramatically accelerating site cleanup, reducing waste inventories, and building a strong public and worker involvement program.

Although the contract permits the department to extend the contract term for three years, the Energy Department will not exercise the third year option unless the contractor demonstrates specific improvement in its health and safety program. In particular, Fluor Daniel Fernald must improve its performance in managing nuclear material and in developing an effective self-assessment program. The department will then determine if the contractor's progress warrants extension of the third year option. The Department of Energy is committed to accelerated cleanup activities at Fernald and believes that this decision will help ensure that site cleanup activities are safely completed by the year 2005.